



## PUBLIC EDUCATION

# Laying the Foundation

About one in five Texas public school students hail from the 43-county Border region. The region's 155 public school districts serve more than 850,000 children. Across the 79,423 square-mile region, school districts range in size from Duval County's 29-student Ramirez Consolidated School District to the 64,000-student El Paso ISD neighboring New Mexico.<sup>1</sup> The districts draw upon local property tax bases ranging from \$1.5 million per student in oil-rich Kenedy Countywide ISD, to approximately \$13,000 per student in the Border's poorest school district, Santa Rosa ISD in Cameron County<sup>2</sup> (see *Terlingua High*).

Offering a sizable financial booster shot to the state's poor districts, Texas lawmakers during the 1990s made progress toward equalizing per pupil educational revenue among school districts. This made more level a playing field long skewed by an unequally distributed property wealth base. Before legislative adoption of a funding method approved by the Texas

Supreme Court, districts had huge gaps in relative wealth. In 1988, for instance, the average Border region school district's revenue per student was \$3,341, while other Texas districts taxing vastly more valuable residential property and mineral wealth had a revenue per student two to three times greater. Funding reform, beginning in 1992, assured substantially more money for poor districts.

As a result, by 1997, Border districts had seen their total revenue increase by 57 percent. In fact, the same districts, neglected for decades by an unbalanced funding system, actually drew upon more money per student than the state average. Border districts in 1997 had access to total revenue of \$5,269 per student, \$134 more than non-Border districts, and \$103 more than the state average.<sup>3</sup>

Educational challenges persist for Border districts, namely a lag between improved funding and student performance. Moreover, if the region is to make the transition to a high-skill, high-wage economy, Border educators

and community leaders should not be satisfied with merely doing better than before. And they're not. With help from the state, they are seeking ways that students can consistently match, or exceed, the educational performance of other young Texans.

### Equalizing School Funding

Before 1992, the amount of revenue a Texas school district could devote to its students depended almost exclusively on its local property tax base. If a district happened to possess a great deal of property wealth, its school board

*Border educators and community leaders should not be satisfied with merely doing better than before. And they're not.*



PHOTO: Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts.

*The future of the Border's economy relies heavily upon education.*

# Terlingua High

The alarm went off at 4:30 a.m. The sky was filled with stars and as black as can be. There was just enough time to pack a lunch and head for school, nearly 100 miles away and a two-hour ride in each direction.

You had to really want to go to high school if you lived in Lajitas. The bus stop was in Study Butte, 17 miles east over a two-lane road that rollercoasters near the Rio Grande. From there, the 6 a.m. bus headed north on Texas Highway 118 to Alpine High School, another 85 miles. It was like living in Dallas and going to school in Waco.

"The bus route from Study Butte to Alpine is the longest school bus route in the entire U.S.," *Newsweek* reported in 1994.

Some 22 high school students watched the sun come up over the Santiago Mountains to the east each morning as their bus climbed more than 2,300 feet through the desert landscape to Alpine, at an elevation of 4,481 feet.

After school, they didn't have the luxury of attending meetings of the Latin Club, participating in the school choir, or practicing with the football team. Instead, they counted the Brewster County landmarks on the way home—Double Diamond Ranch, Cathedral Mountain, Calamity Creek Wash, Butcherknife Hill, Nine Point Mesa, Fizzle Flat, Camel's Hump—before cutting through the Christmas Mountains back to the Study Butte bus stop by 6 p.m. Then, another slow drive along Ranch Road 170 to Lajitas.

Most kids just quit.

The 701-square-mile Terlingua Independent School District didn't have the tax base to build a high school. Neither Big Bend Ranch State Park to the west nor Big Bend National Park to the east paid local property taxes.

Students had the option of going to school in Terlingua until the 8th grade or, if their parents worked in the national park, attending San Vicente Elementary near the park's headquarters. But neither Terlingua ISD nor San Vicente ISD (1,596 square miles) had a high school. When their students reached the 9th grade, the districts faced the prospect of paying

\$1,200 per student to send them north to Alpine five days a week.

Some families found the trip too daunting and made arrangements for one parent to rent an apartment in Alpine for the school year, coming home with their high schoolers on weekends. Others sent their teenagers to live with relatives in Fort Stockton, Van Horn, or Odessa.

Many families just gave up. And many students just left school after the 8th grade.

But no more. In August 1997, Terlingua High School opened its brand-new doors—thanks to the ingenuity

and hard work of local residents who appealed to the largesse of foundations and corporations interested in making sure children in the farthest reaches of Texas receive a high school education. Residents raffled handmade quilts and sponsored barbecues, but they knew they needed to raise funds from outside

donors. In 1995, they created a non-profit group called the Big Bend Education Corporation, and wisely put it under the direction of the Reverend Judith Burgess, who had recently moved with her husband to Terlingua from Virginia.

Rev. Burgess, who spent part of her childhood in Abilene, wrote to friends back in Virginia and encouraged them to be generous with their contributions. They were.

Then she put together a series of grant proposals for Texas foundations and corporations. They were generous, too.

The Meadows Foundation of Dallas gave \$174,500. The Houston Endowment added another \$100,000. The Potts and Sibley Foundation chipped in \$10,000. Smith Barney donated another \$7,500. An anonymous donor gave \$75,000, and a woman in California wrote a check for \$50,000. Others gave what they could, some as little as \$5. It all added up to some \$600,000, including a couple of loans taken out by the Terlingua and San Vicente school districts.

Most of the teachers and administrators have been drawn from the extended local community, and the high school is now one of the largest employers in Big Bend.

*It was like living in Dallas and going to school in Waco.*

An architect from San Angelo has sketched plans for a cafeteria, gymnasium, and library to be built as soon as more money is rounded up. Meanwhile, students bring their lunches from home and eat in whatever shade they can find outside the school, where the thermometer routinely reads 100 degrees. After-school sports are played on a white limestone field that blinds the eyes in the afternoon sun. A golf course in Lajitas, built to accommodate winter tourists, is available to the school's golf team during off-hours.

In an area where more than 80 percent of the children speak Spanish, with extended families living on both sides of the border—three-quarters of them in

substandard housing—only about one-quarter of their parents have high school diplomas.

But now, rather than leaving school in the 9th grade—the most common year for dropping out—these Texas students are coming back. Fifty-one enrolled for the school's debut semester in August 1997, more than twice the number who used to ride the bus to Alpine.

"The children are enthusiastic," says Superintendent Kathy Killingsworth. "They now have a place, and they have a lot of pride in their community."

"It took everyone working together. It was a long, hard fight, but we finally got it done."

could raise a considerable amount of money at a reasonable tax rate. If a district lacked significant property wealth, however, the school board was pressured to impose much higher tax rates, without a realistic chance of keeping up with wealthy school districts. For example, in 1988, total state and local public education revenue in the Border region was \$2,944 per student, 9 percent less than the state average of \$3,202. At the time, public school funding consisted of a minimum foundation program from the state that required a modest local share in the form of a local property tax. That local share varied greatly according to the ability of the local school districts to raise property tax revenue.

Following court challenges to the finance system, Texas lawmakers approved a funding approach ensuring all school districts access to similar revenue at comparable tax rates. Under this

system, the Legislature established that property wealth of \$210,000 per student would raise sufficient revenue at a tax rate of \$1.50 per \$100 of assessed valuation to provide a basic educational program. In each instance, the state would equalize funding so any district could raise the additional funds that a \$210,000 tax base per student would provide. If a school district has less wealth than the benchmark, the state funds the difference on

every penny of tax rate up to \$1.50. Once a school district exceeds the \$1.50 cap, each additional penny raises money only from the school district's local tax base.<sup>4</sup>

Most Border districts, lacking large oil and gas reserves or massive petrochemical or manufacturing complexes, traditionally have had relatively poor property tax bases. Since 1992, they have gained from the state's equalization plan. During the 1990s, state funding for Border

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PHOTO: Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts.

***Improved funding has enhanced school programs in most Border districts.***

PHOTO: Ysleta Independent School District.



**Technology helps prepare high school students for the workforce.**

*The Border region serves 21 percent of its students through bilingual and English as a Second Language (ESL) programs, more than twice the share served in non-Border districts.*

public schools soared from a pre-equalization amount of approximately \$1,819 per student in 1988 to \$3,260 per student in 1997.

Combining these state payments with local tax effort, the Border region's school districts achieved a revenue of \$4,997 per student in 1997, compared to the state average of \$4,983 (see **Figure 3.1**).

#### Higher Educational Costs

The Border region is distinguished by its poverty and the number of Spanish speakers in its population. Sixty-eight percent of Border students are economically disadvantaged, compared to 41 percent of other public school students. Seventy-seven percent of students in the Border region are Hispanic, compared to 26 percent in the rest of Texas.

And perhaps most significantly, the Border region serves 21 percent of its students through bilingual

and English as a Second Language (ESL) programs, more than twice the share served in non-Border districts.

Across Texas, children of Limited English Proficiency (LEP) have been educated primarily through bilingual programs, although students entering the school system in the upper grades

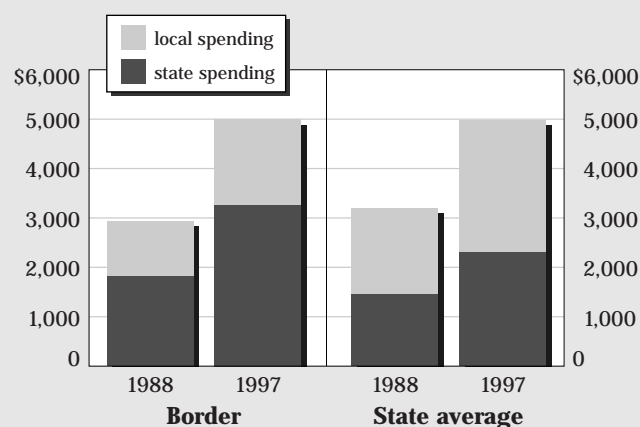
are typically served in ESL programs (see *Teaching Non-English Speakers*).

By law, such determinations are made by a committee of educators and parents when the students enter the system. ESL classes, usually smaller than other classes, require more individualized instruction. Programs for LEP students are a costly investment but one supported by educators as appropriate for bringing students up to par with their English-speaking classmates (see **Figure 3.2**).

Generally, educating economically disadvantaged students and students with limited English proficiency is more expensive than educating English-speaking students who are not poor. Poor students, for a variety of reasons, are likely to arrive at school less prepared to learn. Poor families who cannot afford to buy books, computers, and

FIGURE 3.1

#### State and local spending per student for Border, state schools



SOURCES: John Sharp, Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts, and Texas Education Agency.



# Teaching Non-English Speakers

The goal of all bilingual education and English as a Second Language (ESL) programs is the same: the acquisition of English language skills so that language-minority children can succeed in English-only classrooms. There are three traditional approaches to educating students of limited English proficiency. They are “structured English immersion,” “early-exit transitional,” and “late-exit transitional.”

Structured English immersion is a strategy for kindergarten through fourth grade in which English is used almost exclusively. Children are “immersed in English” in this method, and not allowed to use their native language.

Early-exit transitional programs are also for kinder-

garten through fourth grade, but in these programs, the child’s native language is used two-thirds of the time in kindergarten, and the amount of instruction in the native language decreases over time until, by grade five, the child is receiving instruction completely in English.

Late-exit transitional programs use the native language almost exclusively in kindergarten, phasing out its use much more slowly, with complete English instruction beginning in grade seven.

ESL programs are used for older students, usually newly arrived immigrants. These classes are much smaller, more intensive classes that focus primarily on learning English.

other learning materials for their children lack the means to provide a rich home learning environment to ready their children for formal schooling. In addition,

the educational level of a child’s parents, which tends to be lower for poor families, is one of the greatest predictors of academic success.<sup>5</sup> Due to these fac-

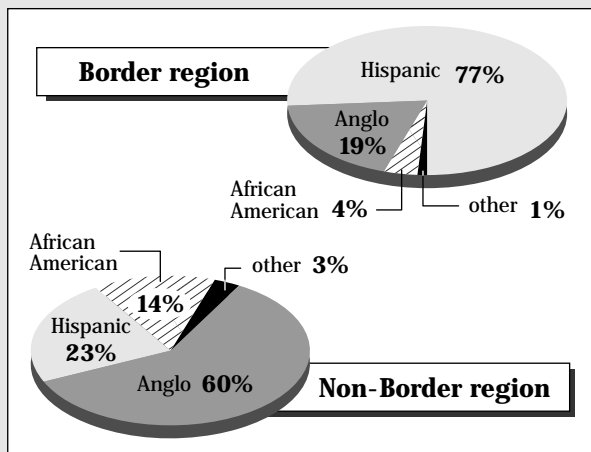
tors, the schools must play “catch up” with such students after they enroll, by familiarizing them with the written word and training them in basic learning skills.

Texas has historically attempted to cover this additional cost through a weighting system used to determine a school district’s average daily attendance, which in turn is used to distribute state education aid. For example, state and local funds deliver about \$270 more for each student in bilingual classes, \$540 for each educationally disadvantaged student, and \$810 for each student who is both LEP and economically disadvantaged. These additional funds are used to lower class sizes, buy materials, and pay for aides to help in

*Poor families who cannot afford to buy books, computers, and other learning materials for their children lack the means to provide a rich home learning environment.*

FIGURE 3.2

## Ethnic composition of public schools for Border and non-Border regions



Note: Totals may not add due to rounding.

SOURCES: John Sharp, Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts, and Texas Education Agency.

PHOTO: Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts.



***Libraries, along with public schools, are a key educational resource in the Border region.***

*This 1 percent may not seem like much of a difference, but in a system that spends over \$20 billion a year, it represents a significant sum of money.*

classrooms where students with special needs are taught.

The Border region in 1997 had 868,305 actual students, accounting for 23 percent of the state total. But taking the additional weights into account, the region had 1.1 million "weighted" students, or 24 percent of the state total. This 1 percent may not seem like much of a difference, but in a system that spends over \$20 billion a year, it represents a significant sum of money.

#### **Bilingual Education in Texas**

Texas began funding bilingual education in 1972 by providing \$25 per student with bilingual needs. In 1984, House Bill 72 substantially increased the amount of money for bilingual programs.<sup>7</sup>

The federal government currently provides about \$10 million annually to Texas for bilingual educa-

tion programs and teacher training, and \$9 million for immigrant education.<sup>8</sup>

The cost of bilingual instruction remains high. In 1997, school districts budgeted nearly \$400 million for bilingual instruction. Yet, the state and local allotment for bilingual programs was approximately \$111 million, with the difference made up from other program revenues.<sup>9</sup>

A 1998 study by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) concluded that students kept in a consistent bilingual program over a five-year period were less likely to be held back than those who had a mix of services or a break in service.<sup>10</sup> This conclusion echoed earlier research, which found that students in late-exit bilingual programs, in which instruction is provided in both languages through the sixth grade, performed better in other subject

areas than peers shifted into English-only instruction earlier.<sup>11</sup>

School districts tend to differ in philosophy. Practices at two schools with award-winning programs for LEP students illustrate this. The principal of one school, located in the Rio Grande Valley, contends that students should be placed into English by third grade, and the vast majority of the students in her bilingual program follow this model.<sup>12</sup> The principal of a bilingual program in Houston does not feel that early-exit from bilingual programs is that important, stressing instead that each child's individual needs must be met.<sup>13</sup> Programs in her school are for pre-kindergarten through fifth grade. Their approaches differ, but both programs are recognized for their success. Many educators feel that bilingual programs should be tailored to fit the population they serve. Given the many forms of bilingual education, the concept of bilingual education as a whole shall not be negated, because one form is favored over another for different student populations (see *Bilingual Education: A Tale of Two States*).

In many districts, Texas teachers with bilingual skills receive a stipend in addition to their base salary. The number of bilingual students in the Border region required that 13 percent of its

# Bilingual Education: A Tale of Two States

**A**lthough California and Texas are similar in the large population of Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students, there are many differences in how the two states approach bilingual education.

California voters in June 1998 approved a proposition that will limit bilingual services to one year of English "immersion." LEP students of different ages will be educated in the same classroom, regardless of their grade level, for the first year they enter public school, and placed in the appropriate grade thereafter. The proposition will provide about \$36 a year per LEP student for tutoring that will continue after the year of immersion.

California's compensatory education program—which, at more than \$300 million, comprises about 2 percent of the state's total education budget—provides for bilingual education plus a variety of other services. In fact, bilingual education is not a primary recipient of California's compensatory education funds.

Texas provides \$1 billion in funding for compensatory education, which

can be used for bilingual services. This amount makes up about 5 percent of the total education budget.

Texas also provides about \$100 million for bilingual services to LEP students, spurred by a 1981 U.S. District Court decision. While the court order was appealed to the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals, Texas implemented its bilingual program.

California bilingual education programs have never been adequately supported. Texas allows local school districts a great degree of latitude in deciding which programs best suit the needs of their students. The state's accountability system, which will soon incorporate results of tests administered in Spanish, has shed light on improvement in educational performance.

In Texas, student entry into bilingual education requires parental consent. Decisions regarding the child's education and exit from the bilingual program are made by the child's Language Proficiency Assessment Committee, composed of educators, counselors, and the student's parents.

*Texas allows local school districts a great degree of latitude in deciding which programs best suit the needs of their students.*

teachers be certified to teach bilingual classes in 1997, compared to only 4 percent in districts statewide. In part reflecting this, the average teacher salary along the border was \$31,887 (\$1,215 more than the state average of \$30,672).

## **Better Funding, Better Education**

Without a doubt, the state's revamped public school funding system has helped level educational access in the Border region. But did the additional state money enhance student performance?

Of course, each student's educational success

derives from his or her personal background, educational environment, and the day-to-day commitment of teachers, administrators, and parents (see *Ivy League Texans*).

But two important trends suggest that, on balance, the infusion of equalized education funds has bolstered student achievement

# Ivy League Texans

**F**rank Guajardo always knew he would be a teacher. But he could hardly have dreamed the influence he would have on his students and their college choices. Guajardo's success in bringing young Border residents to Ivy League universities, with the financial support of alumni and private businesses, could inspire other public school teachers and students throughout the Border region.

Guajardo, a teacher in the Rio Grande Valley's Edcouch-Elsa Independent School District, 25 miles northeast of McAllen, realized in his second year of teaching high school that his students in a junior-level gifted and talented English class set relatively low sights for themselves. While their opening day essays were impressive, their post-graduation goals were not.

Several students expected to attend nearby technical schools, or state universities in Edinburg, Austin, and College Station. Others were less hopeful. Scanning their faces, Guajardo, a 1990 graduate of the University of Texas at Austin, asked them to consider the Ivy League—as in Harvard, Yale, and Brown universities—among others. Most of the students scoffed.

At a student's suggestion, Guajardo offered to take a group of students on an East Coast tour. Together, the students and teacher raised about \$10,000 so nine students could make a summer trip to New York, where they toured Columbia University, took in a Broadway play, and visited tourist attractions. By the next spring, six of the students had been admitted to Ivy League universities, and three subsequently enrolled.

All told, more than 20 Edcouch-Elsa High graduates have been admitted to Ivy League schools since 1993, with several others winning admission to universities such as George Washington and Stanford.

Guajardo's faith in his students has been rewarded.

"I believed my students were at least on a par with UT sophomores," Guajardo said, recalling his reading of their first essays. "They should at least apply to those other schools. But this was not part of their routines or culture. I had to hook them."

As significantly, Guajardo said, he had to win the confidence and support of the students' parents, many of whom had not attended college themselves.

In the Border culture, Guajardo said, "Families tend to be pretty tight. We're not really well-practiced in letting kids go at a young age... The reason the kids are able to go, and they're still going, is the parents trust us."

In one memorable conversation, he said, a mother of a student admitted to Yale University questioned whether her child should enroll.

Guajardo had two quick questions. "Ma'am, do you remember George Bush?" Yes, she did. "*El fue a Yale*. You know who Bill Clinton is?" Yes, of course, she did. "*El también fue a Yale*." The mother, relieved, hung up, satisfied her child would safely be getting a quality education.

While Guajardo now concentrates on another imaginative project—encouraging students to gather, write, and publish oral histories from elders in their community—he is confident local Ivy League successes will continue. Two teachers have taken over organizing the annual recruitment trip, which during 1998 included stops in New York, New Haven, Boston, and Washington, D.C.

One of the teachers, Delia Perez, was among the first of Guajardo's students to take a trip east before applying successfully to Yale University.

Perez said there are no secrets to a successful recruitment program.

"Anybody can raise the funds, plan the trip, and go through with it," Perez said. "The difficult part is finding somebody who's absolutely committed and willing to spend the hours, days, and months working on the fundraising, organizing. You need somebody who's totally committed to the students because they want the students to succeed and improve their lot in life. To get something off the ground, it's very important to have somebody willing to care."



in the Border region. The first, shared by students on the border and throughout Texas, is a rising rate of passing the state's mandatory Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) since 1994—good news for all. Texas public school students must pass the 10th grade, or exit-level, TAAS to qualify for a high school diploma (see **Figure 3.3**).

Beyond this generally rising trend is an indication that students in the Border region are also “catching up” with students elsewhere in the state. In 1994, 47 percent of students in the Border region passed all sections of the TAAS, compared to 57 percent outside the Border—a performance gap of 10 percentage points. By 1997, 67 percent of Border students passed all sections of the exam, only seven points less than the average of 74 percent in the rest of the state.



PHOTO: Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts.

***Student performance in Border districts has improved dramatically.***

Additional educational funding sent to the Border in the 1990s appears to have been a vital factor in shrinking the TAAS performance gap. This can be seen by comparing TAAS scores in various grades along the border with scores statewide before and after funding increased and the accountability system was implemented. If the equal-

ized educational funding helped raise the TAAS results of children in the region, this would be most evident among younger students, who have enjoyed the greater funding for a larger percent of their schooling.

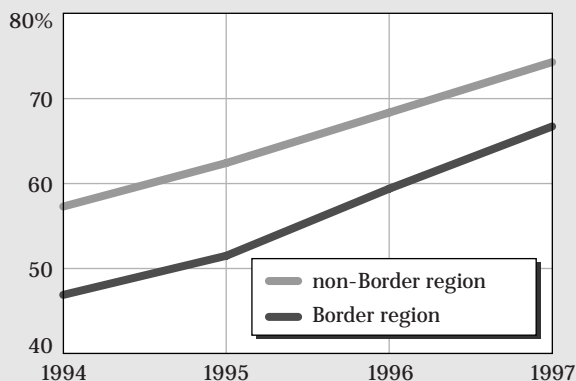
According to 1997 TAAS results, students in third, fourth, and fifth grades in the Border region—those students who have enjoyed the full effects of more equalized funding—performed an average of 4 or 5 percentage points below their peers statewide. The TAAS performance gap widens between Border and students statewide in the higher grade levels, including students tested in eighth grade and in high school; the same students were already in at least third grade when the funding system changed in 1992 (see **Figure 3.4**).

Since the school funding and accountability system

***The TAAS performance gap widens between Border and students statewide in the higher grade levels.***

**FIGURE 3.3**

**Percent passing all sections of TAAS test in Border v. non-Border regions**



SOURCES: John Sharp, Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts, and Texas Education Agency.

PHOTO: Laredo Independent School District.



***Younger students have enjoyed the effects of more equalized funding for Border schools.***

*Since inception of the accountability system, student performance has increased markedly across the state, even while the standards have been raised each year.*

was put in place in the early 1990s, the gap between students educated along the border and students in the rest of the state has narrowed. For example, the gap between TAAS scores of children entering public schools since 1992 lagged behind those outside the border by six percentage points. Scores of the older students—who did not benefit as early from the new system—lagged as much as 12 percent (eighth grade scores). If a connection between funding and TAAS success is truly valid, as time goes on, the overall performance gap between students at every grade in the Border region and the state should shrink further.

The Texas Public School Accountability System, lauded by many as the best in the nation, may also have contributed to increases in TAAS scores, both in the Border region

and statewide. This system, implemented in the 1993-94 school year, rates school districts by the percentage of their schools whose students have passing scores on the TAAS. The accountability system

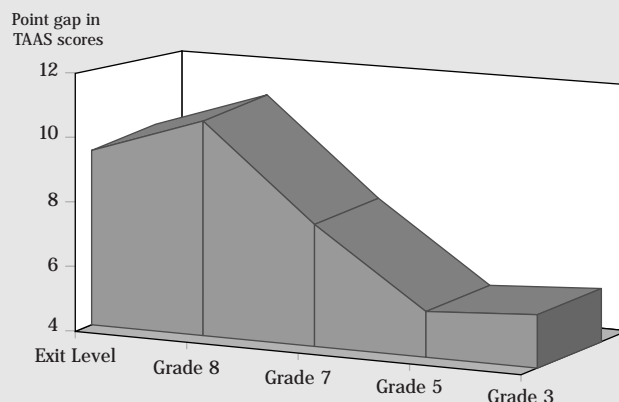
measures the achievement of four groups of students at each campus. Each of these groups has to achieve the same established standard in the ratings system for an individual school to receive an accredited rating. In addition to TAAS scores, the state accountability system takes into account dropout rates and attendance. Since inception of the accountability system, student performance has increased markedly across the state, even while the standards have been raised each year. The tradeoff for local districts has been increased local control over programs and funds.

One explanation for the remaining gap in student achievement rates in the Border involves the region's teaching popula-

FIGURE 3.4

### **The performance gap between Border school districts and the rest of the state, 1997**

The performance gap between Border students and students in the rest of the state is narrowing in earlier grades. As these younger students progress through school, the performance gap should narrow further.



SOURCES: John Sharp, Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts, and Texas Education Agency.

# Open Enrollment, Better Grades in Ysleta ISD

In 1993, just after joining the Ysleta Independent School District (YISD) as superintendent, Anthony Trujillo said he wanted students to be able to go to any school in the district as long as space was available. This was before the state implemented its accountability system and “low-performance” rating became an issue.

Trujillo knew the condition of the district’s schools and believed an open enrollment policy could prompt healthy competition among campuses, while eliminating the need for parents to claim residency with relatives to place their children in the schools they preferred.

Under the open enrollment policy, schools that did not offer the services or assistance their students needed soon saw students exercising their option to move. This competition among individual schools, along with the superintendent’s intense emphasis

on student performance, had dramatic results. In 1993, the first year of the state’s accountability system, YISD had seven low-performing campuses. The district did not keep comprehensive records concerning internal transfers at that time, but school officials estimate that nearly 3,000 students exercised their right to switch schools that year.

The following year, YISD had no low-performing schools and one school rated as “recognized.” By the 1994 school year, eight schools were recognized. In the 1995 school year, 15 schools were recognized, and the following school year brought an “exemplary” rating, and 22 schools were recognized. In the past three years, not a single internal transfer request was based solely on a school’s performance ratings, an understandable fact considering that nearly every school in the district is showing dramatic improvement.

*Under the open enrollment policy, schools that did not offer the services or assistance their students needed soon saw students exercising their option to move.*

tion. In 1996, the teacher turnover rate was higher in the Border area than in the rest of the state, despite the higher salaries.

In cases where schools continue to perform below the state average, certain measures can make a difference. School districts that have space for enrollment growth at their campuses can benefit from open-enrollment policies. Choice among public schools can

inject competition into the complacency that often sets into low-performing schools. This practice has been used with great success in the Ysleta Independent School District in El Paso (see *Open Enrollment in Ysleta ISD*). In school systems that lack the capacity to use open-enrollment, low-performing schools can be re-staffed and administrators re-assigned. San Antonio—once required to

re-staff its low-performing schools—now uses this as the method of choice for reforming its schools. Finally, if schools can find the revenue to do so, they should provide campus-wide bonuses for teachers who lift their campuses to a higher level of performance. This approach has been successful in other parts of the country, and deserves a try in Texas. This would be especially helpful in attract-

PHOTO: Laredo Independent School District.



***Enrollment is expected to grow faster in Border school districts than in the rest of the state.***

***Many school districts along the border have rapidly growing student enrollment.***

ing quality teachers to the Border area.

Another approach to improving student performance is enhancing the quality of bilingual educators. Many observers perceive the number of uncertified bilingual and ESL teachers as indicators of a shortage in this area. About 9 percent of the teachers in elementary-bilingual classrooms in the Border are not certified to teach bilingual education. Yet 38 percent of the elementary level teachers certified to teach bilingual education in the Border region are not teaching in bilingual classrooms. So, while a good number of teachers are assigned to bilingual classrooms though uncertified for these positions, about seven bilingual teachers are teaching in non-bilingual positions for each bilingual position filled by a teacher not certified for bilingual instruction. This

indicates that there may not be a shortage so much as a lack of desire to teach in bilingual classrooms.

The State Board for Educator Certification produces guidelines for colleges of education that outline the requirements for bilingual certification. These programs are supposed to include training in linguistics, psychology, methodology, and culture, but they vary greatly from one college to the next. The only test of a teacher's grasp of the second language is a state exam, the Texas Oral Proficiency Test (TOPT). Furthermore, teachers who already possess certificates in other areas may easily become certified for bilingual education by meeting two requirements. They must pass the Examination for the Certification of Educators in Texas (ExCET) for bilingual certification, which is administered in English, and the TOPT.<sup>14</sup>

### **Battling Growth, Keeping Teachers**

Texas has made huge strides in educational funding. For the Border, this has contributed to improved overall educational performance when compared to the rest of the state. But this commitment could erode due to the strong growth in educational demand in the Border and the lack of state funding to deal with the problems of growth.

Many school districts along the border have rapid-

ly growing student enrollment. But their growth is not unique; it is representative of a statewide trend. Border district enrollment has increased at an average rate of 9 percent since 1992, four percentage points below the rest of Texas, at 13 percent. But TEA projects the Border districts will grow slightly faster than the rest of the state, at the rate of 10 percent by 2001, compared with a growth of 9 percent for the non-Border districts.<sup>15</sup>

Students are more mobile. Student mobility rates, calculated by dividing the number of students who have six weeks or less at a given school by the number of students in attendance for the whole year, are also slightly higher for the Border area, 24 percent, than for the non-Border area, 21 percent. This mobility is stressful for the school districts, which must plan for an uncertain number of students at different times of the year and try to offer a meaningful curriculum to students who may have attended several other schools in one academic year.

Washington recognizes the mobility in the Border region and elsewhere in the state with federal funding of about \$43 million a year for migrant education through Title I, Part C of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.<sup>16</sup>

Enrollment growth requires school districts to constantly adjust and



revise their plans, while administrators never know exactly how many students will register at the beginning of each year. Growth not only means acquiring additional supplies and hiring more teachers, but building new school facilities as well. Unfortunately, unlike the change in funding for operations in the early 1990s, the state did not provide direct assistance for the acquisition and construction of facilities until 1995, when the Legislature appropriated \$170 million in facilities grants. These were awarded to districts based on need as measured by their relative wealth. Sixty of the districts in the Border area received a total of \$76 million through these grants, which sparked a modest building boom.

The 1997 Legislature made a lasting commitment to help districts with the cost of facilities, spurring a true building boom throughout the Border area. Border districts either have issued or plan to issue \$1.1 billion worth of bonds for facilities renovation and construction through the Instructional Facilities Allotment (IFA) program, 58 percent of which will be paid for by the state. The state share for districts outside the Border area will average 40 percent.

The concept behind this program is simple. Local school districts issue bonds, and the state pays

a portion of the school district's annual debt service, based on the district's state share of funds. The less property wealth a district has, the greater the share is of debt paid by the state. Texas lawmakers appropriated some \$200 million for debt service payments in the first two years of this program, which is expected to continue to be appropriated for the lifetime of the debt. The amount of debt issued in the Border region represents slightly more than one-fourth of approximately \$4 billion of debt issued statewide through IFA.

A school district's ability to meet its need for facilities depends on several factors. Local school taxes, relative property wealth of the district (which affects school funding), and the likelihood that local voters will approve a bond issue all

play a part. The historic level of debt service and total tax rates along the border limit most school districts' access to facilities funding. In 1997, maintenance-and-operations tax rates in the Border were 3 cents less than the non-Border average of \$1.30 per \$100 of assessed valuation, but average debt service rates were 4 cents higher (23 cents compared with a non-Border average of 19 cents), largely reflecting the need to tax at higher rates to

*The state did not provide direct assistance for the acquisition and construction of facilities until 1995.*



PHOTOS: Laredo Independent School District.



***Border districts report needing an additional \$1 billion by 2003 to serve their growing student populations.***



achieve the revenue necessary to build adequate facilities. Total school tax rates averaged \$1.50 in the Border area in the same year, a penny more than those in the rest of the state. Thus, many Border districts, facing the prospect of swelling student enrollment and the need for additional facilities and staff, can rely only on their local tax bases.

In 1998, school districts in the Border region had approximately \$82,400 worth of property wealth per student, considerably less than the state average of \$137,000 per student.<sup>17</sup> So the average Border district could raise a little less than half of the state

average with a one-penny addition to their tax rates. To add to the stress of this situation, 54 percent of the students in the Border area resided in school districts with tax rates above \$1.50, compared with 40 percent in the rest of Texas. To raise similar amounts for new schools, given this lower tax capacity, Border tax rates for debt service would need to be almost double those in other parts of the state once they exceeded the tax cap of \$1.50. This combination of low-wealth districts serving high-growth populations is a serious challenge to the Border region, which faces the prospect of huge tax increases to fund the

building needs of school districts.

This presents a special problem to those rapidly expanding school districts in the Border region exceeding the \$1.50 cap. Border districts responding to a 1997 survey by the Comptroller's Office said that by 2003, they will need an additional \$1 billion worth of renovations and new facilities to serve their growing student populations. They also report a need for \$1.8 billion in *immediate* renovations and new facilities. At least \$800 million in needs were unmet by the IFA program (not counting the needs in Border districts that did not respond to the survey).<sup>18</sup>

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Texas Education Agency, "Academic Excellence Indicator System 1997," (<http://www.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis/97/DownloadData.html>). (Internet document.)
- 2 Measured as students in weighted average daily attendance. Texas Education Agency, Division of School Finance, "Legislative Planning Estimate Financial Data," Austin, Texas, 1997. (Computer printout.)
- 3 Texas Education Agency, *Snapshot 1987-88, Snapshot 1996-97*, (<http://www.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/snapshot/>). (Internet document.)
- 4 V.T.C.A., Education Code, x42.303, The cap for school district maintenance and operations tax rates is also \$1.50.
- 5 National Center for Educational Statistics, National Education Longitudinal Study 1988, *Student Achievement and Family and Community Poverty: Twenty Years of Education Reform*, by Shelley Drazen (Washington, D.C.: 1988), p. 4.
- 6 Texas Education Agency, "Legislative Planning Estimate Financial Data."
- 7 Texas H.B. 72, 68th Legislature, Second Called Sess. (1984).
- 8 Telephone interview with Chuck Russell, assistant to the Commissioner for Federal Relations, Texas Education Agency, June 6, 1998.
- 9 Texas Education Agency, "Academic Excellence Indicator System 1997" and "Legislative Planning Estimate Financial Data."
- 10 Texas Education Agency, *Academic Achievement of Elementary Students With Limited English Proficiency in Texas Public Schools* (Austin, Texas, January 1998) p.1.
- 11 U.S. Department of Education, *Final Report: Longitudinal Study of Structured English Immersion Strategy, Early-Exit and Late-Exit Transitional Bilingual Education Programs For Language Minority Children* (Washington, D.C., February 1991).
- 12 Interview with Minerva Hasfjord, Principal of Casteneda Elementary School, Brownsville Independent School District, Brownsville, Texas, May 7, 1998.
- 13 Interview with Adriana Castro, Principal of Garcia Elementary School, Houston Independent School District, Houston, Texas, May 11, 1998.
- 14 State Board for Educator Certification, information received March 31, 1998.
- 15 Texas Education Agency, Division of School Finance, "Pupil Projections," March 1997. (Computer printout.)
- 16 U.S. Department of Education, "State Information," June 1997 (<http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/MEP/StateInfo/texas.html>). (Internet document.)
- 17 Per student here is per student in weighted average daily attendance (WADA). Texas Education Agency, "Legislative Planning Estimate Financial Data."
- 18 Border districts indicated a need for \$1.8 billion in facilities and received approximately \$1 billion through the Instructional Facilities Allotment program; thus, \$800 million in unmet need remains.